



A Break in the Deafening Silence

“Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

Proverbs 31:8–9, invoked at the mostly evangelical protest of House budget cuts in Washington, D.C., on December 14, 2006

“Posturing yourselves as a bunch of lonely, lefty martyrs may not be the path of wisdom.”

An evangelical brother,
critical of the protest

It was about 11:00 p.m. in Washington, D.C., when I called home to let my wife, Tina, know that the Jim Wallis-led action of civil disobedience at the Cannon House Office Building went well, and that I had already been released earlier that evening by the D.C. Capitol Police. Our housemate and fellow parishioner, Kim, answered the phone and immediately announced to Tina, “Yep, Craig got arrested,” while our four children listened on.

With characteristic concern and compassion, my loving wife responded as I might have expected she would: She burst out laughing. So would the rest of my church family upon receiving “news of my chains” during the Advent service that following evening. Alone in her sympathy, my dear 8-year-old daughter, Kiana, cried out with righteous indignation, “That’s not funny! You don’t care about Daddy!”

While I look back at my daughter’s reaction that night with warm fond-

ness, I also treasure the laughter of my wife, pastors, and fellow congregants, for it reflected many years of life together as a gospel-centered community. It is not that our congregation is accustomed to participating in public protests and arrests, for we are not. Neither did their ease with my D.C. escapade stem from some sort of commitment to San Francisco-brand contrarianism. Rather, such levity was informed by over two decades of ecclesiological reflection which has led us to understand that the Church exists to incarnate and proclaim Christ’s heart for his world, particularly victims of sin and injustice.

Therefore, advocating for the poor in a public action like this was not embraced as the heroic antics of religious progressives but rather as an obedient expression of the Church’s witness. Like the appeals we regularly send to political leaders through the advocacy agency Bread for the World, I went to D.C. representing my congregation as an “embodied letter,” so to speak, to give voice to God’s judgment on public policies that favor the nation’s wealthiest while neglecting the most vulnerable.

Consistent with the ideologically bound critique leveled by the well-meaning brother quoted above, the national media predictably cast the event as a meager, “faith-based” show of force by the political left. Glossed over was the fact that many Christians present would personally reject such a characterization—for example, folks like John Perkins, Glen Kehrein, Mary Nelson, and Barbara Williams-Skinner of the Christian Community Development Association; Ron Sider of Evangelicals for Social Action; and Reverend Raymond Rivera and Luis Carlo, key Hispanic leaders in theological education.

Predominantly evangelical in representation and in spirit, the good news of God’s kingdom was marvelously

proclaimed that day through classic hymns, Christmas carols, gospel spirituals, prayers, and the unapologetically Christ-centered preaching of the Word by those who simply love Jesus. Beyond a mere attempt to dissuade the hand of Congress, the D.C. action represented something far more important: the proclamation of Christ’s supremacy over all rulers and authorities. This is a claim rarely heard from, or demonstrated by, an evangelical mainstream that is seduced and co-opted by American political and corporate power.

Shortly after returning from Washington, I met bedside with my dear pastor and gospel mentor, Bob Appleby, mercifully recovering after the recent removal of a brain tumor. His perspective encouraged me deeply. Having experienced the tumultuous civil rights era in East Palo Alto and Chicago as a budding pastor, he was intimately aware of the deafening silence of the white evangelical church, a sorrowful apathy that has persisted to this day.

Upon hearing of the evangelicals present at the Cannon building protest, he said, “I never thought, in my wildest imagination, that something like this would occur within my lifetime.” For my pastor, what happened on December 14th was an intriguingly significant break in the silence, an observation echoed by a growing number of those attentive to the possibility that God may be graciously waking up his Church in this nation for this time. May it be so. ■

Craig Wong is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries, a congregation-based nonprofit located in San Francisco’s Mission District that serves low-income families through academic tutoring, youth job-training, adult education, health services, and advocacy. He invites response to this column at onbeingthechurch@gum.org.